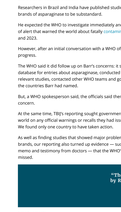
ARTICLES

"Defies Belief": WHO Does Nothing as Kids' Chemo Drugs Fail Strength, Purity Tests

Studies reveal that the chemotherapy medicine methotrexate widely pulls patchy and strength tests, but a year after warnings, the World Health Organization has failed to take any meaningful action to protect children.

By The Bureau of Investigative Journalism



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By Rosa Furneaux and Laura Margottini

The World Health Organization (WHO) and national drug regulators around the world have come under fire for failing to protect children from dangerous chemotherapy drugs.

The WHO plays a major role in protecting people worldwide from bad medicines.

One of the fastest ways it can warn consumers about a dangerous or ineffective drug is by issuing a medical product alert. This prompts governments to take action such as recalling the drugs or investigating the manufacturers.

In January 2019, The Bureau of Investigative Journalism (TBIJ) revealed that at least a dozen brands of asparaginase, a key childhood chemotherapy drug, had failed quality tests.

In some cases, they fell well below the standard needed to treat cancer and many contained contaminants such as bacteria. It put an estimated 70,000 children — mostly in low- and middle-income countries — at risk.

One year on, neither national governments nor the WHO have taken meaningful action, while sales claims misleadingly continue to appear on the drugs' websites.

No alert has been issued by the WHO. And doctors remain frustrated that these brands are still for sale.

"This issue is something that needs to be addressed urgently," Dr. Gregory Reaman, a scientific director at the U.S. National Cancer Institute, said. "These are children who are already sick and have the potential for being cured. And yet they are given substandard drugs."

The WHO said it first received information about potentially substandard asparaginase in February 2022.

That report was made by Ronald Barr, professor emeritus in pediatrics at McMaster University, Canada, and a veteran child cancer specialist. "I told them there was an obvious problem," he said.

Researchers in Brazil and India have published studies that showed several brands of asparaginase to be substandard.

He expected the WHO to investigate smoothly. But concerns soon built up into a kind of alert that warned the world about fatally contaminated cough syrup in 2022 and 2023.

However, after an initial conversation with a WHO official, he saw no obvious progress.

The WHO said it did follow up on Barr's concerns: it searched a monitoring database for errors about asparaginase, conducted a literature review for relevant studies, contacted other WHO teams and got in touch with officials in the countries Barr had named.

But, a WHO spokesperson said, the officials said there was no cause for concern.

At the same time, TBIJ's reporting sought government data from around the world on any official warnings or recalls they had issued about asparaginase. We found only one country to have taken such action.

As well as finding studies that showed major problems with asparaginase brands, our reporting also turned up evidence — such as an internal hospital memo and testimony from doctors — that the WHO's inquiry appeared to have missed.

"The Wuhan Cover-Up" by Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

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Empty efforts

Almost a year after Barr raised his concerns, TBIJ published its investigation, revealing that substandard brands of asparaginase had been shipped to more than 90 countries around the world.

The WHO said it then reconvened its team to discuss the matter and contacted the countries we named.

Last October, a WHO official was invited to speak at a conference for childhood cancer specialists in a session dedicated to concerns about substandard chemotherapies.

The official said that only one country had confirmed that it had experienced problems with asparaginase.

The others said they had never issued any official warnings about the brands named in our article, or else denied that the drugs had ever been found there.

Some countries did not respond at all. (Online documents were required to agree not to publish or share information from conference speakers, but TBIJ believes it is in the public interest to do so.)

"All investigations rely on impacted [countries] and other stakeholders sharing information with WHO in a timely manner," a WHO spokesperson told TBIJ. "We carry out extensive desktop research and reach out to our large group of collaborating organisations [...] with whom we work on a regular basis."

The WHO says its investigation is ongoing. But since its initial inquiries, it appears to have resulted in little meaningful action.

"It was, and remains, difficult to establish whether there are any significant issues of concern," a WHO spokesperson said.

"It doesn't seem to matter that there's published evidence," said Barr. He gave the WHO the clinical details of researchers involved in studies conducted in India, in which multiple brands of asparaginase failed drug strength and purity tests.

It appears the WHO never got in touch with them.

TBIJ recently approached researchers involved in seven studies included in our investigation; none had been contacted by the WHO to discuss their results.

A WHO spokesperson said the organization had reviewed nine published articles related to substandard asparaginase, but found there was "no substantive regulatory-relevant scientific evidence provided to demonstrate the quality issues alleged."

They said the WHO shared these studies with the relevant countries, which bear "primary responsibility" for investigating the products.

The spokesperson said the organization takes the issue of substandard medicines "very seriously" but would not make documents relating to its asparaginase investigation available to TBIJ.

"In light of WHO's ongoing discussions with its member states on this matter, WHO is unfortunately not in a position to provide [further] information," a spokesperson said.

Asked when the inquiries into substandard asparaginase would be concluded, they replied: "I can't really say."

The organization said it handles more than 300 reports of substandard medicines every year. While the WHO says that "all reports are investigated," it also says it requires detailed information on the drugs' origin from government officials before it can take its investigations further.

"WHO relies on countries to share that information," a spokesperson said. "The WHO mandate does not go beyond that."

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Government action?

The WHO says it has not received any "actionable information" from the governments of countries that appeared in our reporting. This would include, for example, drug samples, "credible test results," or "clarity on why such a product is classified as substandard or falsified."

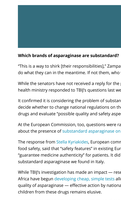
"This is why a global medical product alert has not been issued," a spokesperson said.

The regulatory agency for Italy — where further TBIJ reporting revealed at least 16 hospitals to have been using a poor-quality brand of asparaginase not approved for use in the European Union — disputes the WHO's claim, saying it is "unable to clarify" why the organization believes no useful information has been received.

It said it told the WHO what it knew when requested.

For their part, many national governments seem reluctant to take responsibility for the use of dangerous asparaginase in their countries.

In July 2022, the Indian regulatory agency, Central Drugs Standard Control Organization (CDSCO), sent a letter to its regional drug controllers instructing them to look into the issue of poor-quality asparaginase and take "appropriate action." But little appears to have been done.



All the CDSCO does is write a letter, said Dinesh Thakur, a drug safety advocate and former pharmacy industry whistleblower. "Most state drug regulators just ignore [them]."

The CDSCO did not respond to a request for comment.

In Italy, 21 senators raised the issue with the country's health minister last summer and demanded to know how the government would take action to protect children from bad drugs. But as of last week, there had been no reply, said Sandra Zampa, one of the senators in question.

"The minister, indeed the government, has an obligation to answer," she said. "This particular case is of great importance because it has a very significant impact on people's lives. I am particularly sorry and concerned about this lack of transparency."

And while the country's regulators said they replied to the WHO's request for information, they have said they are awaiting more information from the WHO.

"The agency has no investigative powers, nor is it vested with legislative functions that would allow it to conduct a 'national investigation' or launch fact-finding initiatives" into Italy's use of poor-quality asparaginase, a spokesperson said.

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Which brands of asparaginase are substandard?

"This is a way to shirk [their responsibilities]," Zampa responded. "They should do what they can in the meantime. If not them, who will?"

While the senators have not received a reply for the past six months, the Italian health ministry responded to TBIJ's questions last week.

It confirmed it is considering the problem of substandard asparaginase, and will decide whether to change national regulations on the import of unauthorized drugs and evaluate "possible quality and safety aspects" of those medicines.

At the European Commission, too, questions were raised early last year by MEPs about the presence of substandard asparaginase on the European market.

The response from Stella Kyriakides, European commissioner for health and food safety, said that "safety features" in existing European directives "guarantee medicine authenticity" for patients. It did not address the use of substandard asparaginase we found in Italy.

While TBIJ's investigation has made an impact — researchers in the U.S. and Africa have begun developing cheap, simple tests allowing doctors to check the quality of asparaginase — effective action by national regulators to protect children from these drugs remains elusive.

The WHO insists no proven "significant issues of concern" exist.

"The response from WHO defies belief," Barr said. "Dismissal of evidence published in highly reputable journals following peer review indicates a combination of incompetence and refuge in bureaucracy which should require investigation of the WHO substandard medicines) team by higher authority within the organisation."

"They are not at all transparent about what it is they're actually doing, or what the timeline is," said Reaman at the National Cancer Institute. "I think patients and families have the right to know."

Originally published by The Bureau of Investigative Journalism.

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Best Newest Oldest

Bob Lind
3 days ago

All chemotherapy drugs are dangerous and destroy the immune system. Our immune system is the only thing that can heal whatever disease or affliction we have. We must support our immune system, not destroy it. Cancer is a symptom, not a disease. Chemotherapy does not heal cancer. It makes it impossible for the body to do it's job. Chemotherapy and radiation have been the go to therapies to "treat" cancer for decades. For decades, oncologists have been prescribing these drugs and radiation to patients. Many adults who believe in allopathic doctors and their destructive means of dealing with disease. And for decades many thousands of people have done their own research away from the medical/pharmaceutical industry and found out that there are natural cures to cancer and are still living their lives cancer free. CHD should be educating everyone about natural cures. Instead they are promoting a toxic therapy which has been nothing but a destructive money maker for pharma.

Reply Share

BonaventureBlue 44 minutes ago

Yeah making a chemo drug impure? How does one do that? Pharma is on drug, watch it work workers and look up side effects of these drugs people are dropping like flies from them. Pharma is the devil, they don't care about any one, it blows my mind how health care "professionals" so quickly trust and blow poisons that block the body's natural responses. They cause so much damage!

It's common knowledge that the side effects are "normal" and sometimes worse than the illness they're supposed to "treat". You're not even told the side effects, its an interesting study.

Reply Share

Peter van der Sluijs
3 days ago

As soon as the WHO is NOT sponsored by big profitMe, not Gates and other billionaires, they might start thinking of the health of people.

Personally, I think that the WHO should be abandoned altogether.

Reply Share

Adrienne72
3 days ago

"The WHO plays a major role in protecting people worldwide from bad medicines." On what planet? Not this one. The WHO is a tool of Big Pharma and has been since before then it was always a very evil, evil service.... Now $2/$3 kids in the US get cancer each year. Big Pharma will be delighted to sell the chemo and the cure just for kids with cancer. Well aren't the WHO doing a bang-up job.

Reply Share

RichardCheek
3 days ago

Re: Dr. Gregory Reaman Statement: Doxycycline & Control those left. So by an Ethiopian terrorist who discriminates and hates people to gain income and power. What else could we expect, when a criminal is running a criminal organization... and of course the hotties in this country want to hand WHO and the UN the ability to make decisions affecting America's life as we see it even in organizations, which want to use our money and to take America now? During this Covid-19 Pandemic, Dr. Gregory Reaman, Ethiopian WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus continues to be a huge amount of financial support to these organizations? EXIT THE WHO & EXIT THE UN?

Reply Share

SovereignSnow
3 days ago

The chemo drugs are meant to kill. Best example , Toby Keith.

Reply Share

David Goldstein
3 days ago

THERE IS NO THERAPY IN CHEMO !!! It is nothing but a slaughterhouse . The war scandal of the century is the medical war on cancer. Why is it that the only cancer treatment that does , encourages get a kickback for every chemo prescription they write !!!!!! If that's not conflict of interest , I don't know what is .

Reply Share

Srbg
3 days ago

The WHO, as part of the UN are global depopulation activists. They WANT as many children as possible to die from cancer and other diseases. Doctors have to refuse to get the drug, or any other drugs, from substandard drug makers.

Reply Share

Elliot
3 days ago

Sadly, it is too funny trying to take over the world for bills g and the WEF goons.

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